

HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL HONORS ADSNY WITH GRASSROOTS PRESERVATION AWARD



Photo: Meghan Weatherly

GOOD NEWS FOR AN ART DECO GEM IN THE BRONX

BY SAM GOODMAN

It was called "The Riviera of New York" when it opened in July, 1936. Long neglected, the Art Deco Bathhouse and Promenade at Orchard Beach—a 1.1-mile long crescent-shaped public beach at the eastern end of Pelham Bay Park—may once again become a haven for beachgoers, thanks to a multi-million dollar allocation for their restoration.

Between the 1920s and 40s, the Bronx's population increased by 664,000. These were the golden years for the northernmost borough of New York City, a time when the Bronx was labeled the "Wonder Borough," a term coined by the Bronx Board of Trade, which routinely boasted that eventually two million people would call the Bronx home.

Inspired perhaps by the amazing energy that seemed boundless in the Bronx, and despite the onset of the Great Depression, Robert Moses, New York City's first Commissioner of Parks, set out to build a grand beach on Long Island Sound. Orchard Beach, located within the 2,700 acres of Pelham Bay Park, would offer Bronx residents a sensational place for summer fun. Work commenced in 1934, with funding largely provided by the Works Progress Administration.

The highlight of Moses's plan had less to do with sun and swimming and more to do with dining facilities, changing rooms, and a sand-free area for passive recreation. In 1936, construction began on the magnificent bathhouse that greeted visitors on their arrival. Designed by Aymar Embury II in a style that combined Beaux-Arts principles with Streamline Moderne forms and motifs, this imposing 200,000 square-foot structure consists of two curved pavilions to the north and south joined by a raised plaza. The bathhouse facilities in the pavilions originally included a 500-seat cafeteria, showers, restrooms, and locker rooms equipped with 5,000 individual lockers. The upper plaza offers an unobstructed view of the most ambitious public beach development north of

and since that time the building has suffered from neglect. The wide bands of glass block windows that once filled the lower portion of the Streamline Moderne façade disappeared long ago. Also gone are the four pairs of charming winged horses designed by Harry Lowe that originally flanked the entrance. After the limestone sculptures were damaged by vandals, they were relocated to the Steinberg Family Sculpture Garden at the Brooklyn Museum, where they are on loan from the

City of New York.

ADSNY led the campaign for landmark designation of the pumping station, engaging many segments of the preservation and local communities. At a Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) hearing last fall, ADSNY presented testimony, letters of support, and a petition with 371 signatures. While the LPC voted against landmark designation of the pumping station this year, LPC Chairwoman Meenakshi Srinivasan stated, "We did receive a lot of support in terms of designating this building...that's the reason why we are not voting on it being taken off the calendar on the basis of merit. Maybe at some point in time it could be restored." The Commission encouraged the community to find a new use for the site.

As a result of ADSNY's efforts, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services and the New York City Economic Development Corporation are now studying the feasibility of adaptive reuse for the pumping station. ADSNY joins LPC Commissioner Adi Shamir-Baron, a champion of Art Deco era architecture, in recognizing that, "It is a building that's worthy of designation."

The Art Deco Society of New York was honored to be the recipient of a 2016 Grassroots Preservation Award from the Historic Districts Council, the citywide advocate for New York's historic neighborhoods. The awards are given to activists and groups who have campaigned for community preservation throughout the city. In recognizing ADSNY, the Council cited its commitment to drawing attention to and promoting the preservation of New York's irreplaceable Art Deco architecture. In particular, the Council saluted ADSNY's "heroic efforts" to save the New York City Fire Services Pumping Station on Neptune Avenue in Coney Island.

The pumping station, which opened in 1938, is the only known public building designed by architect and developer Irwin S. Chanin, best known for such projects as the Century and Majestic apartment buildings on Central Park West and the Chanin Building at the corner of Lexington Avenue and East 42nd Street. Its purpose was to ensure constant water pressure for firefighters in outer areas of Brooklyn.

New York City's Fire Department closed the pumping station in 1976

Coney Island. The crescent-shaped promenade is just above the beach level, and colonnaded loggias extend from the upper plaza.

Moses included a bathhouse in his plans because most people arriving at Orchard Beach came fully dressed in their street clothes. In that era, beachgoers wouldn't ride a bus in their swimsuits, so a place to change was essential. Likewise, after a day in the sun, many families wanted to shower and change back into their street attire before looking for a place to dine. So a day at the beach was just that, a daylong escape from the oppressive summer heat. Over time, however, the increasing number of automobiles, coupled with the advent of air conditioning, made such excursions less necessary, while the upkeep of the bathhouse grew ever more costly.

Now, 80 years later, the bathhouses and pavilions have undergone no extensive renovations. Indeed, as Bronx prosperity ebbed, these landmarked buildings were largely neglected and by the 1970s, substantial areas of the pavilions were simply boarded up.

Recent events renew hope for restoration. A \$2.5 million pre-scoping study completed in April 2015 found that the bathhouse remains structurally sound, although the details that made it both beautiful and functional—terrazzo floors and glazed blue tiles—are “faded history.” Still, because this facility represents the most striking example of Art Deco architecture found anywhere along the entire length of Long Island Sound, its restoration is essential. Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. recognizes this need and as part of his 2016-2017 fiscal year allocation, has provided \$10 million to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) for restoration. This is the largest single allocation by the Borough President for any capital project initiated by the DPR.

The overall restoration plan has three priorities. The first is an allocation of \$39.4 million to restore the north and south pavilions and upper plaza, which were designated as New York City Landmarks in 2006. This work will include opening the 12-foot wide loggia for a café concession with views of the beach; construction of a passage with space for seasonal kiosks and flexible programming; adaptation of the north and south waiting rooms off the upper plaza for programming purposes; and installation of a cafeteria and retail

services in the brickfaced areas on the lower level.

The second priority is the construction of a \$7.1 million beach passage under the upper plaza that will allow for ADA-compliant beach access, eliminating the need to negotiate steps in order to reach the beach.

The third priority is the \$14.4 million relocation of maintenance and operational facilities. These facilities are vulnerable to flooding caused by storm surges. This project would also provide additional space for commercial and public use.

These three separate priorities constitute a comprehensive plan to dramatically restore the pavilions and improve access to Orchard Beach, while also providing a storm-safe location for the equipment and offices currently located there. The projected cost totals \$60.9

million. Once funds have been committed to this project, the timetable is 18 months for design, nine months for procurement, and twenty-four months for construction.

Today Orchard Beach attracts as many as 100,000 visitors per day during the height of the summer. Hopefully, they will soon be able to enjoy the same amenities offered to the beachgoers of the 1930s.

Sam Goodman is a proud third-generation resident of the Bronx's Grand Concourse. Since 1995 he has been employed by the Bronx Borough President's office as an urban planner. As a hobby, he also offers walking tours highlighting Grand Concourse buildings and the area's rich history.

Postcards: From the collection of Sal Arena

